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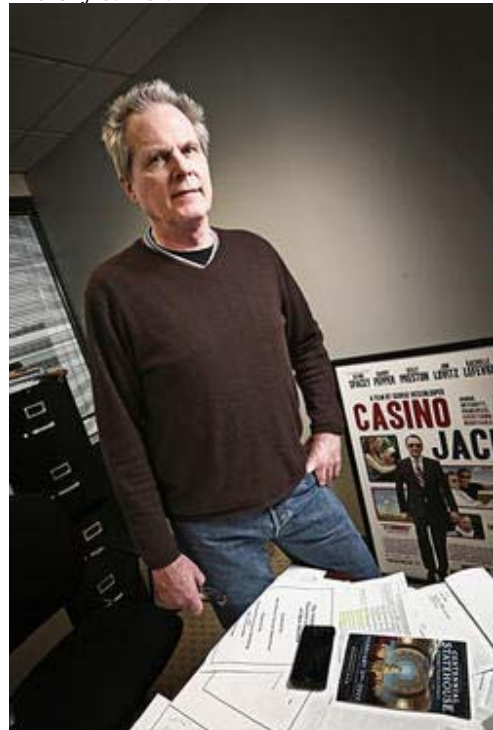


Colorado hopes to lure filmmakers with a new plan

By **Melanie Asmar**

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Anthony Camera



Donald Zuckerman wants to roll 'em in Denver.

Anthony Camera

Colorado's film industry is a bit like Billy Crystal, whose 1991 hit movie *City Slickers* was set in the modern-day Wild West and largely filmed here. It used to be a leading man, roping cattle and scoring starlets. Now it does voiceover work for cartoons.

Despite our state's scenic beauty, filmmakers have stopped making movies in Colorado because it's cheaper to film elsewhere, especially in states that offer hefty tax breaks and rebates on money spent filming there. Two of those states, Utah and New Mexico, often stand in for Colorado in movies featuring the Centennial State.

But Donald Zuckerman, a movie producer who sits in the director's chair at the state Office of Film, Television and Media, has a plan to change that — a plan that he hopes will work where previous ones have failed. Zuckerman has proposed doubling Colorado's measly 10 percent cash rebate in order to bring its incentives in line with competitors such as the aforementioned New Mexico (25 percent) and Utah (15 to 25 percent). To sweeten the deal, Zuckerman wants to add another ingredient to Colorado's incentive package: a guarantee that the state will back up to 20 percent of a producer's bank loan — for a fee to be negotiated between the state and the moviemaker.

"I'd like to see people actually making movies here," says Zuckerman, who has nearly twenty films to his credit since 1995. "Right now, the only [movies that are made here](#), for the most part, are little homegrown movies. They're usually very low-budget, half a million dollars and under. We haven't had a Hollywood-type production, even smaller independent films, come here in about four years."

One of the last was *Imagine That*, a 2009 flick in which Eddie Murphy plays a too-busy suit-and-tie dad who discovers that his daughter's blanket can tell the future, business-wise. The \$55 million film flopped at the box office (imagine that), and two top executives at Paramount Film Group were sacked shortly thereafter, which did nothing to improve Colorado's



Harris Kenny opposes "Hollywood handouts."

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image as a place to make movies. Come to think of it, Colorado's film fortunes are also a bit like Eddie Murphy: once Axel Foley, now Dr. Dolittle.

To help, Governor John Hickenlooper has proposed setting aside \$3 million in the state's budget for film incentives. Hickenlooper and others have touted it as an investment in economic development. Film crews spend mad money on location — hiring local set builders, lighting experts and makeup artists, renting facilities and equipment, and housing and feeding actors and crew members. But in what promises to be another tight budget year, lawmakers on both sides of the aisle have raised skeptical eyebrows.

Harris Kenny, a Denver-based policy analyst for the libertarian Reason Foundation, says he can understand why. "At the end of the day, this is a budget item; this is money being given out at the expense of other things," says Kenny, who opposes what he calls "Hollywood handouts." "When it comes to the budget, it is a fixed pie."

However, those who work in the entertainment industry say their slice is an important one. "That \$3 million," says Duke Hartman, co-founder of Denver-based reality-television production company High Noon Entertainment, "is quite modest to create jobs and maintain jobs in the state and keep a healthy production community so that folks like High Noon have those resources in Denver and we don't spend our lives having to shoot in New York and L.A."

The beauty of the Rocky Mountains started appearing in films more than a hundred years ago when it was captured in silent Westerns and in promotional clips such as photographer Harold Buckwalter's 1905 film *Denver in Winter*, in which city

folk strolled about in short sleeves to showcase the mild climate.

Colorado continued to make cameos, some more extensive than others. Parts of the Westerns *Cat Ballou* (1965) and *True Grit* (1969) were filmed here, as was the 1978 Clint Eastwood fist-fighting love story *Every Which Way But Loose*. Chevy Chase stopped in Durango for the 1983 classic *Vacation*, while Bruce Willis came to Denver to film a scene for 1990's *Die Hard 2*, and Steven Seagal stopped by a few years later to play a chef at the Wynkoop Brewing Company, which became the fictional Mile High Cafe in *Under Siege 2: Dark Territory*. Jim Carrey and Jeff Daniels played idiots at the Stanley Hotel, better known as the inspiration for Stephen King's *The Shining*, in 1994's *Dumb and Dumber*. And Denver saw steady film income in the '80s and '90s from the television show *Father Dowling Mysteries* and a string of Perry Mason movies.

The past decade saw fewer movie stars come to work. Among them: Samuel L. Jackson and Josh Hartnett, who co-starred in a 2007 movie called *Resurrecting the Champ*, about a young sports writer for a fictional Denver newspaper who catches his big break when he finds who he thinks is a former boxing champ living on the streets. John Elway even makes an awkward cameo. But Jackson and Hartnett's scene with Elway, which takes place at his restaurant, is one of the only ones actually filmed in Denver.

"It looks like it took place in Denver, but they actually shot the entire movie in Alberta," Zuckerman says. "They stayed for four days here, and they spent about a million dollars here. But they spent most of their money in Alberta."

When the money leaves, so does the infrastructure. Frederic Lahey, the founder of the Colorado Film School, says film students struggle to find work in Colorado after they graduate and are forced to move to places like New Mexico, Connecticut and Louisiana, which have killer film incentives and a booming industry. "The state is already doing film incentives," Lahey says of Colorado. "It's just that they're subsidizing the creation of homegrown talent and then exporting it to other states."

Hartman worries about the viability of companies that support the filmmaking business. One of the best, Film/Video Equipment Service Company, shuttered two years ago, he says. Another, Lighting Services, Inc., which maintains the only major motion-picture soundstages in the city, recently lost a major revenue stream when High Noon stopped filming the reality show *Food Network Challenge* there about nine months ago. "After eight years, the network decided they had enough of those [episodes]," Hartman said of the show. High Noon still films two shows in Denver for the DIY Network, *Disaster House* and *Rescue Renovation*, though neither uses a soundstage.

While High Noon also has offices in New York and Los Angeles, Hartman, a former staffer at Channel 9 who founded High Noon with two partners, doesn't want to think about ever moving. "But our L.A. operation is just thriving and has so many resources and so much depth to those resources," he says; Even if a particular wardrobe designer isn't available one day, ten others are.

Film folks trace Colorado's dwindling role back to when several states, taking a cue from Canada, began to offer film incentives a little more than a decade ago. Hollywood responded, moving production to states that offered generous breaks.

Meanwhile, Colorado's film climate was in distress. To save money in 2003, Governor Bill Owens cut the state's film commission, which was the first of its kind when it was established in 1969. Six years passed before another governor, Bill Ritter, re-established it in 2009 as the Colorado Office of Film, Television and Media and put in place the 10 percent rebate to filmmakers, proclaiming that "film is going to be part of the solution that brings Colorado out of the recession faster."

Only it hasn't been. Last year, a bill that would have added ten cents to every movie ticket to raise cash for incentives died in the legislature like Paul Newman and Robert Redford at the end of *Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid*, which was partly filmed in Colorado. It wasn't the first such bill to come to a grisly end.

Shortly thereafter, Hickenlooper tapped Zuckerman to take over the state's two-person film office. The two met through Hickenlooper's late cousin, the director George Hickenlooper, who'd worked with Zuckerman on several projects, including the 2001 drama *The Man From Elysian Fields*, in which Hickenlooper — then Denver's mayor — has a bit part, pre-politics, and the documentary *'Hick' Town*, in which his politics are the focus. Zuckerman was also the producer for the George Hickenlooper-directed film *Casino Jack*, which was nominated for several awards.

Zuckerman, who moved here from L.A. with his family to take the job, says the governor gave him a specific task: to develop a plan to lure filmmakers back to Colorado without breaking the bank.

He believes his double-whammy proposal will do just that. "Between the two — the rebate, which at 20 percent is still a little low, (and) the loan guarantee, as well — we look very attractive," he says. No other state offers a similar loan deal, Zuckerman says: "They don't realize it would be a benefit." But as a producer himself, he says he understands the business and what it takes to catch a moviemaker's

eye.

The details of the loan-guarantee proposal are complicated, but Zuckerman says he's figured out a way to "virtually assure that the money will be paid back to the bank." To start, Zuckerman's office would review a script to make sure it's "commercial" enough to make money. The office would also require that the movie feature at least one celebrity and that a good company be hired to sell the film. Once profits roll in, the filmmakers would have to pay back the percentage that the state guarantees first.

"Let's say Alec Baldwin does a movie and the movie is a thriller," he posits. "Even if the movie turns out not to be good, it will get licensed for television all over the world," thus earning enough money to at least pay back the state's part of the loan.

The rebate part of Zuckerman's plan is simpler. Filmmakers, television and commercial producers, music-video shooters and video-game developers would get a 20 percent rebate on all of the money they spend in the state, given that they spend a certain amount of it (the bar is currently \$100,000 for Colorado companies and \$250,000 for out-of-state producers), hire a certain percentage of local workers (currently 25 percent) and spend \$125 to register as a "foreign entity" with the Colorado Secretary of State.

State representative Tom Massey, a Republican from Poncha Springs and a longtime champion of the movie biz, has said he plans to introduce Zuckerman's idea as a bill in the legislature this session.

Hartman and Lahey think the idea has a real shot.

"Donald has structured this, and he's done his homework and...we have a governor who supports it. We have never had a governor who supported it," Lahey says. "I think what happened is we waited to get the ultimate deal. This is the best deal any state has ever had. It's the best deal for Colorado, the best deal for taxpayers, the best deal for the film industries and the best deal for a couple thousand young filmmakers who would like to be working in the state of Colorado."

Even Kenny the skeptic thinks this proposal is better than past ones. "This is an improvement over the 2011 attempt, which would have put fees on movie tickets, which is totally unrelated and would have hit consumers and small movie-theater chains," Kenny says. "I still think it is bad policy, but it's more transparent."

Proof that it's a bad idea, he adds, lies in studies conducted by states and think tanks that show that these type of incentives aren't boosting the economy as much as promised. In light of budget cuts, several states are considering eliminating or scaling back their programs; Michigan, once the most generous, recently put a \$25 million cap on theirs. Other states, such as Arkansas, Idaho and Maine, appropriated no funds for their film incentives in 2011, according to the Tax Foundation, a public-policy think tank.

But that hasn't discouraged those backing Zuckerman's plan. On Wednesday, February 8, supporters of the increased incentives will rally at the State Capitol for the first-ever Cinema Day to talk to legislators about the importance of recapturing Colorado's film glory and putting its filmmakers back to work.

Zuckerman is expecting hordes of people, including those who work in the industry and a few hundred students from the Colorado Film School.

Lahey canceled all of his classes for the entire day. "I've never done that. I'd never considered doing

it," he says. But this, he explains, is different. "I consider it to be absolutely important to the students' future."

As actor Jack Palance, playing Curly, explains to Billy Crystal in *City Slickers*: "Do you know what the secret of life is? One thing. Just one thing. You stick to that, and everything else don't mean shit."



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